

Those who ruled for decades spreading lies about farm bills: PM

PATNA, DHNS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday said that the Opposition was spreading canards about the farm bills passed by the Lok Sabha.

"Those who remained in power for decades but did nothing for the farmers are today shedding crocodile tears while opposing bills for agriculture reforms, and are spreading lies," said Modi, while launching railways projects for the poll-bound Bihar, through video-conferencing.

Without taking anyone's name, Modi said, "These people are spreading rumours that the government will not procure foodgrains at the minimum support price (MSP). Let me assure you that the government is committed to ensuring MSP to farmers."

Modi later inaugurated 1.9-km long Kosi Rail Mahasetu which will now connect Kosi with Mithila regions. The old bridge was washed away 86 years ago when a massive earthquake hit Bihar-Nepal in 1934.

Meanwhile, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar 'admonished' his deputy and senior BJP leader Sushil Kumar Modi for using the term 'migrants'.

"Don't call anyone migrant. The entire country is one. Anyone can go anywhere and work. No one is a migrant here. I beg with you with folded hands not to use the term 'migrant' any more," he said.

Sushil had earlier stirred a row when he said that there was no dearth of jobs in Bihar but still migrants went outside the state to work just for the sake of pleasure.

Why are farmers angry with agricultural reform bills?

Three agricultural reform bills passed by the Lok Sabha have angered large sections of farmers in Punjab and Haryana, considered the granaries of India. The bills have also given ammunition to the Opposition to attack the government but Prime Minister Narendra Modi has strongly defended them. What reforms do these farm sector laws propose and why are farmers angry?

— Sagar Kulka

What are these bills?

On June 5, the Centre promulgated three ordinances – The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance, The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance, describing them as reforms that would be a panacea for farm sector woes. The ordinances are being replaced by Acts of Parliament in the ongoing monsoon session.

What do they promise the farmer?

The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill is the most contentious of all. It allows farmers to sell their produce beyond the limits of the local APMC markets within or outside their state. Successive central governments have pitched for APMC reforms but without luck as states are not willing to dilute their control over these markets.

The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill seeks to allow farmers to enter into contract farming with food processors, agribusiness firms and wholesale dealers at a pre-agreed price. It also allows them to benefit from high prices prevailing at the time of harvest.

The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance seeks to remove commodities such as cereals, pulses, oilseeds, onions and potatoes from the list of essential commodities and also does away with the imposition of stock limits except under extraordinary circumstances such as war, famine, natural calamity or an extraordinary rise in prices. The government argues that stock limits were necessary when India faced acute food shortages after Independence. But since the country has been witnessing surplus foodgrain production, these stock limits are no longer needed.

This looks good for farmers. Why are they angry?

Farmers fear these changes would lead to the dismantling of the APMC system and eventually the abolishing of the minimum support price (MSP) regime. The Opposition is mainly confined to Haryana and Punjab, where much of the procurement on MSP takes place. The MSP is a scheme under which the government buys produce at a fixed price. This helps the farmers if the price drops sharply.

As for contract farming, farmers are worried about inadequate safeguards in dispute resolution in case the buyer fails to honour the contract and forces them to sell at a lower than agreed price.

The Opposition believes that doing away with stock limits would allow big corporations to dictate terms to farmers.

What does the government say?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has assured farmers that the three laws would not do away with the MSP regime and that the government would continue to procure farm produce as earlier. He also said the laws do not snatch the rights of APMCs but only provide farmers an additional avenue to sell their produce.

Why did Harsimrat Kaur Badal quit the Union Cabinet?

Union Food Processing Industries Minister Harsimrat Kaur Badal's party, the Akali Dal, has a largely agrarian support base in Punjab. Akali Dal president and Sukhbir Singh Badal claimed the party was never consulted on the bills and that Harsimrat's concerns were ignored. Farmer unions have kept aside their differences in opposing the bills. After ruling Punjab for 10 straight years, the Akali Dal was routed in the 2017 assembly elections. It cannot risk angering the farmers if it has to survive in state politics.